



Planetary Health

COVID-19's Warning to the World

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Key messages >>>

- Outbreaks of infectious diseases are on the rise and are likely to become more common as human populations destroy habitats, forcing wildlife into closer proximity to humans.
- The field of planetary health is gaining attention, as the connections between human well-being and the health of overall ecosystems become evident. In the current world of uncertainty, the one thing that is certain is that the health of the planet and those that inhabit it are inextricably linked.
- Pollution has reduced and air quality has improved as countries have locked down to prevent the spread of Coronavirus. However, the impact of reduced greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption will be temporary unless governments adopt new approaches to development that protect both the health of the planet and those that inhabit it.
- The COVID-19 crisis warns the world of the price it will pay without aggressive action by governments to reduce carbon emissions and adopt cleaner and healthier models of development.

COVID-19

The rapid spread of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is having profound social and economic impacts across developed and developing countries. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic, and by April 11, 2020 there were nearly 1.7 million cases in 210 countries, areas, or territories, and over 100,000

people had lost their lives. The novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 has been linked to animals and was reportedly transmitted to humans in a live animal market in Wuhan, China, in December 2019.

Emerging infectious diseases

Research [suggests](#) that outbreaks of infectious diseases such as Ebola, SARS, MERS, bird flu, and now COVID-19 are on the rise. The [US Centers for Disease](#)

Control and Prevention estimates that three-quarters of new or emerging diseases that infect humans originate in animals. **Infectious outbreaks, like the novel coronavirus, threaten to become more common as human populations destroy habitats, forcing wildlife into closer proximity to humans.** As humans continue to encroach on animal habitat and destroy fragile ecosystems, they come into ever-greater contact with animals. Further, illegal wildlife trade and illegal live animal markets are frequent causes of such diseases.

A wake up call on planetary health

While human health **research** scarcely considers the surrounding natural ecosystems, a relatively new discipline, **planetary health**, examines the health of human civilization along with the state of the natural systems on which it depends. The field of planetary health is gaining attention, as the connections between human well-being and ecosystem health become increasingly evident. While the field of planetary health is new, the idea of planetary health was brought to the attention of the world way back in 1993 when the Norwegian physician **Per Fugelli** wrote, "The patient Earth is sick. Global environmental disruptions can have serious consequences for human health. It's time for doctors to give a world diagnosis and advise on treatment".

This "treatment" necessitates radical redefinition of the models of development adopted by governments, which, till now, have promoted production and consumption at any cost. Today, three-quarters of the land-based environment and about 66% of the marine resources have been significantly altered by **human exploitation**. More than a third of the world's land surface and nearly 75% of freshwater resources are now used for plant or livestock production. The **expanding human footprint** resulting in habitat loss and fragmentation disrupt critical animal behaviors and risk extinction of one million species of flora and fauna,

many of which are predicted to be forced into extinction within just decades. The COVID-19's global disruption provides a glimpse into the world disorder that lies ahead if we let temperature rise by more than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

COVID-19 calls for reflection

The COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call to the fact that, if governments continue business as usual, devastation of the Earth's landscape for 'development' will persist at the cost of the planet's natural resources and threaten the very survival of all species. Such a model of development, which serves governments' insatiable appetite for 'development' putting profit over the cost of life, must be radically redefined. Active and visionary leadership from world governments is urgently needed to redefine approaches to development, which will be a stark departure from the environmental desecration the world has witnessed in recent decades. As countries scale up responses to COVID-19, an opportunity exists to align with the proposed redefined values of development, which embrace a safer planet and a promise of improved health for all.

Impact of COVID-19 on the environment

As countries lock down and social distancing is enforced, many **environmental parameters** have shown improvement as pollution levels have decreased, energy use has dramatically reduced, and greenhouse gas emissions have fallen. China, the largest global emitter, has witnessed a drop in carbon emissions by 25% early this year; pollution in New York has reduced by close to 50% because of measures to contain the spread of the virus; and a nationwide lockdown in India—the country with the highest pollution levels in the world—resulted in a drop of PM2.5 (fine particulate pollutant) by 30% in some cities in just a few days. The current decrease in pollution is definitely good news, but it does not by any means imply that climate change is slowing down.

Tentative [estimates](#), which project that COVID-19 could trigger the largest ever annual fall in carbon emissions point to the fact that this fall would not come close to bringing the 1.5°C global temperature limit within reach. Global carbon emissions would need to fall by more than 6% every year this decade, which is equivalent of more than 2,200MtCO₂ (metric tons of carbon dioxide) annually, to limit temperature increase to less than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. [Concentrations of carbon dioxide](#), the gas that is primarily responsible for trapping heat in Earth's atmosphere, are up from [413 parts per million this time last year to 416 parts per million](#) now. The Scripps Institute of Oceanography has highlighted that fossil fuel use would have to decline by about 10% around the world, and that this would need to be sustained for a year to reflect clearly in carbon dioxide levels. Any visible, positive impacts of reduced energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions will be temporary without a sharp shift in political focus to cleaner and greener solutions.

Emerging waste management issues

If mishandled, the large volume of plastic and hazardous waste generated during the COVID-19 outbreak will jeopardize the environment and human health. The proper management of biomedical waste generated by hospitals and by [self-care](#), such as medical packaging and contaminated masks, gloves, and used or expired medicines, is imperative. The COVID-19 pandemic can also lead to increase plastic packaging

intensity, which could further complicate the management of waste. The safe handling and sustainable management of this waste is therefore a vital element of defining a new model for development.

Long-term vision needed

Positive, sustainable environmental impacts demand long-term changes in production and consumption norms. These changes will be necessary in both rich and poor countries and will demand making radical shifts in political focus. The role of public opinion in compelling such a change will be key. As people become more aware of their dependence on the environment, governments must focus on effective [science-policy interface](#) or changes in policy, which is informed by science. A strengthening of international scientific partnerships and collective action is needed for all governments to deal with the challenge of redefining models of development to improve the lives of all species and [Protect Our Planet](#). The current disruptions due to COVID-19 are likely pale in comparison to the upheavals in store, if governments do not act aggressively to limit warming to less than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and adopt cleaner and healthier models of development. As governments think about the world post COVID-19 and prepare for what comes next, they must closely examine how their actions to protect our planet can be part of the new world. It is clear, as the world grapples with many unknowns, the one thing that is known is that the health of the planet and those that inhabit it are inextricably linked.

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Analytical Brief on Climate Ambition and Sustainability Action

The analytical brief series, brought out jointly by the World Sustainable Development Forum and the Protect our Planet Movement, seeks to highlight a topical issue relevant to the realization of the sustainable development goals and ambitious climate actions.

About WSDF

The World Sustainable Development Forum (WSDF) is a not-for-profit organization incorporated separately in Europe, Norway and the U.S. Its North American arm WSDF-NA, headquartered in Washington, DC carries 501c3 tax exempt status. WSDF is a global initiative to promote and mobilize global action for effective implementation of both the Paris agreement on climate change and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the UN General Assembly. WSDF's relevance and role lies in acting as a facilitator for helping with implementation of actions required under these two sets of agreements.

About POP Movement

Protect our Planet (POP) Movement believes that the impacts of climate change will not affect a single country but the planet, in its entirety. POP believes that the power of the youth of the world will unite and to address this challenge. POP believes that the time to act is now and that knowledge is the true currency of changing the future.



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